

# education *update*



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## Taking the Fear Out of the First Year

Preservice classroom immersion, ongoing site-based support, and a realistic approach take some of the fear out of the first year.

New teachers go through a sink-or-swim period at the beginning of their careers, and many decide to just get out of the pool. Almost a quarter of new public-school teachers leave teaching within their first three years. More than ever, school leaders and teacher-prep programs are being called on to stem early-onset teacher burnout.

There are many causes of new teacher stress, including lack of preparation, support, and—obviously—classroom experience.

"To be a great teacher, you've got to be prepared. We

don't think you can just walk in and do it," says Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) Program Director Jesse Solomon. In the BTR program, preparation takes shape over a full year working at the elbow of an experienced mentor teacher "who's both an excellent teacher but also who's really trained to be a mentor, who's explicit about his or her practice and thinking and instructional decisions, so that [trainees are] learning by doing, with someone who's really good at the work." In the first year, new teachers aren't falling back on textbook practices—they're propelled forward by contextualized preparation, an engaged professional teaching community, and their own mistakes.

For new teachers, mistakes are inevitable. Kilian Betlach, a Teach for America (TFA) alumnus and a blogger at Teaching in the 408, recalls how dangerously close he came to being buried alive by paperwork as a first-year teacher in 2002. "I graded all the time," he confesses. "I lived in a house with four other TFA teachers, and we were like, 'We need pledges. We need some undergrad students to help us with all of this.'"

Figuring out planning, paperwork, and time management is just part of the unavoidable trial-and-error process of being a first-year teacher, says Betlach. "I graded every piece of paper my kids handed in, with comments. What a waste of time. You learn to prioritize—this gets comments and a grade, this gets a check mark, and we move on," he says. "First-year teachers tend to work a ton. You get all fired up, and it's this chest-thumping thing of 'Look how hard I work!' Yeah, I was working hard, but I was working stupid."

As Betlach learned, the daily reality of the classroom will leave even the most well-prepared new teachers needing to work out some kinks.

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## Taking Out the Fear

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### Putting Prep in Context

For teacher preparation to be most effective, it should include plenty of experiential training that places education coursework in context. Typically, teacher prep combines theory and research with induction and mentoring.

Columbia University's Teachers College, Stanford University's Stanford Teacher Education Program, California's New Teacher Center, and programs out of the Universities of Wisconsin and Minnesota are credited with combining the right mix of experiential training and support. TFA, the program that helped to prepare Betlach for the classroom, gets lauded for harnessing young, passionate, social justice-minded teacher wannabes.

Though TFA also catches flak for struggling to sustain quickly tapped-out newbies, it gets points for its highly contextualized training and for teaching future educators how to deal with some of the issues students face outside school walls that could impact their classroom performance.

"The first time you encounter a kid who didn't have breakfast and is just hungry, you've already had the opportunity to think through some of these obstacles to teaching and learning. There's an aspect of that that's pretty invaluable," says Betlach.

Several programs provide new teachers serving high-needs populations extra support. Betlach has worked with two groups overseen by the New Teacher Project—Oakland Teaching Fellows, a fellowship program for career changers and recent college graduates without teacher training, and Oakland City Teaching Corps, a one-week training program that prepares credentialed teachers specifi-

cally to enter a high-needs urban context. Basically, says Betlach, you learn how to "refocus and rethink your skill set to be able to reapply it and have success in a totally different context from what you've previously taught or worked in."

### Mastering the Dimensions of Effective Teaching

"One of the first things we did in developing the BTR program," says Solomon, "was decide that if a city like Boston is going to take control of its own teacher preparation, it should do so around a vision of what it means to be an effective teacher in that city. And that didn't really exist."

BTR established eight core competencies of an effective teacher and mapped program curriculum, courses, and assignments backwards with those competencies as the desired outcome. These competencies, called the dimensions of effective teaching, were adopted districtwide, meaning district professional development and teacher evaluation tools were all aligned, Solomon says.

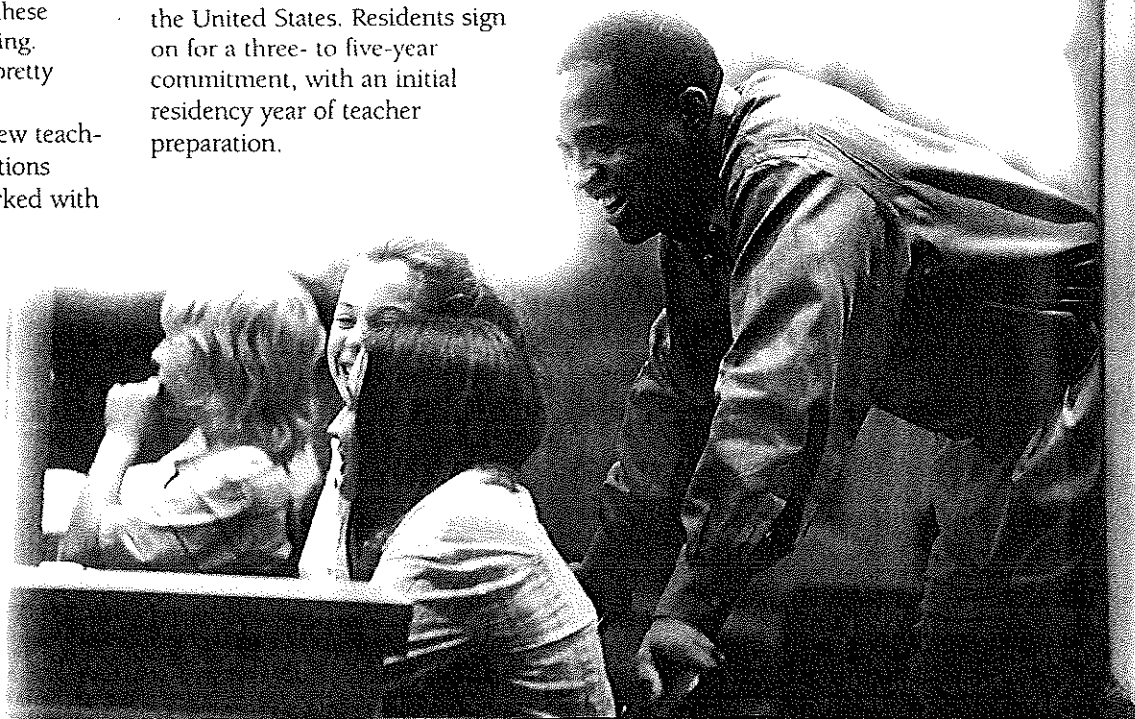
The BTR program is part of the Coalition of Urban Teacher Residencies, a program with additional locations in Chicago and Denver that is heralded for sending high-quality teachers into some of the hardest-to-staff schools in the United States. Residents sign on for a three- to five-year commitment, with an initial residency year of teacher preparation.

The residency programs are modeled after medical residencies and partner with local universities and high-needs school districts. In this case, aspiring teachers receive practical training in underperforming public schools, in conjunction with rigorous coursework. The residencies are characterized by intensive induction and ongoing mentoring at the school sites.

In his experience, Betlach finds that experiential, residency-based models are the best for preparing new teachers. He also notes that teacher preparation should match the reality of the environment in which new teachers will be working. "I think, increasingly, the preparation matches the reality in the suburbs but doesn't match extreme rural or high-needs urban contexts," he says. "We need to make the horror-story first year part of the past."

### Learning Firsthand

Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (NCCTQ) recently surveyed new teachers about their training and on-the-job obstacles for the report *Lessons Learned: New Teachers Talk About Their Jobs, Challenges, and Long-Range Plans*. The report shows that new teachers say their coursework and training could be better matched to the diversity



of the classroom, they need more useful training for working with students with special needs, and school policymakers should work to reduce class size.

"Overall, new teachers were happy with their training, but there was this area of a gap, when they got into their own classrooms, so they'd turn to other teachers and administrators for guidance," says Jean Johnson, Public Agenda's executive vice president and head of its Education Insights division, which works to enhance public and community engagement in public education. "Practically, when you look at all the potential diversity issues in any given classroom, they're going to be challenging for a new teacher to deal with given the size of the class they're teaching."

"Historically, smaller class sizes have been at the top of the new teacher wish list. New teachers consistently say, 'We could do a better job, no matter what the challenge, if our classes were smaller.' Next, more effective training in differentiating instruction helps new teachers address the needs of a wide array of learners," Johnson notes.

According to Denise Meister, faculty advisor to the ASCD Student Chapter at Penn State University at Harrisburg, another major challenge for new teachers is learning how to negotiate classroom management.

"Classroom management can't be taught without a context," says Meister. Her students conduct multiple site visits to classrooms, giving these teacher candidates the opportunity to observe various management techniques and participate in different classroom environments. "These field experiences also give the candidates the opportunity to talk to teachers informally about how they manage the classroom and learn that teachers have their own styles in terms of building rapport and managing behavior," says Meister.

### Attrition Holds Answers

Getting new teachers into the classroom is one thing, but how can schools keep them? The Vancouver (Wash.) School District seems to have found a

## More Online

New teachers make up a vocal segment of teacher blogs and social networking sites. Read more at [www.ascd.org/authors/ed\\_update/eu200808\\_varlas.html](http://www.ascd.org/authors/ed_update/eu200808_varlas.html).

way to retain new teachers. The district keeps 91 percent of new hires committed and connected to the profession by studying and targeting the most common reasons why teachers leave.

Ed Wilgus, the Vancouver School District's professional development manager, concedes that while they couldn't do a lot in the short term to improve teacher compensation, they could focus on some of the other leading reasons teachers leave: quality of administrator support, student behavior and discipline, student motivation, and faculty influence.

Wilgus said in a January 8, 2008, *Education Week* online chat, "We believed that if we could change these four [factors], we could at least lessen the significance of money." The district developed a new competency model for administrators, aligned with the competencies of a great teacher, and focused on meeting teacher expectations for support. They also significantly

increased teacher training in classroom management and intervention strategies, as well as tools for dealing with risk factors (like poverty) that affect motivation. "Teachers don't enter the profession fearful of these at-risk barriers and characteristics, but they do leave the profession if they aren't given the tools to overcome them and be successful with children," Wilgus noted.

### Heading into Second

The summer after a new teacher's first year is a great time for reflecting and rejuvenating. It was during that time when Betlach realized he'd done a ton of projects with his students but wasn't so sure they were any better off for having done them. "Going into my second year, it was all about planning, structure, and organization. How do I plan [activities] in a sequence that makes sense?" he says. Getting a handle on what was working and what wasn't was certainly a priority during his downtime.

And what was his second priority? To chill out. "That first year was so tough. The last thing I needed to do that summer was to get a job, go to training, or teach summer school," Betlach says. Instead, he set out for his backyard with refreshing beverages and a stack of novels—survival items for returning for year two feeling renewed and focused. **B/V**

—LAURA VARLAS

## Professional Practices That Work

October 24–26, 2008

ASCD's Conference on Teaching and Learning will be held in Los Angeles, Calif., October 24–26, 2008. Focusing on the theme "Professional Practices That Work," this year's conference offers educators innovative strategies for boosting student achievement.

ASCD also offers three Pre-Conference Institutes on Thursday, October 23: Leadership and Mentoring, Classroom Formative Assessment, and Classroom Management That Works.

For more information, go to [www.ascd.org/teachingandlearningconf](http://www.ascd.org/teachingandlearningconf).



